A Brief Description of Liberal Freemasonry in Turkey

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In this article, the main features of Liberal Freemasonry in Turkey will be presented.

Below are the delegates of Liberal Freemasonry in Turkey visiting the mausoleum of **Mustafa Kemal Atatürk**, the founder of Turkish Republic. (2019)

The phrase "Liberal Freemasonry in Turkey" is rather a broad expression; it currently comprises of four separate masonic bodies, namely as follows:

The Grand Lodge of Liberal Freemasons of Turkey,
having a relation for higher degrees with

The Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite for Turkey.

The Grand Lodge of Women Freemasons of Turkey
similarly having a relation with

The Women Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

Prior to descriptions, we kindly wish to explain in brief the reason of referring to this group of freemasons as "liberal" in general.

This term is used in the sense of "extremely free", independent, adogmatic, and not bound to any essential requirement of religious belief or practice. It may well be extended to include indiscrimination of every sort.

Despite not being very popular in the masonic world, this term has been adopted by some other grand lodges as well. Some are actually liberal in application but don't indicate this specifically within their name. Of course, most grand orients, mixed grand lodges and federations of the Human Rights (Droit Humain) don't need to do so.

Considering Freemasonry in Turkey, the term "liberal" is certainly needed in English language, because there's another grand lodge holding the title of "Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons".

The term "free and accepted", shortly F.A.M. or "ancient free and accepted", shortly A.F.A.M. is being mentioned in the name of grand lodges that observe the prerequisites set forth by the United Grand Lodge of England, thus regarded as "regular" according to their own principles

As regards the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, there's also a second supreme council of A.A.S.R. in Turkey, receiving members from the latter grand lodge.

These masonic bodies had to be quoted as well, but our concern in this paper is the former only.

This complexity thus necessitates the use of "liberal", at least for distinction between the approach and understanding of relevant masonic establishments. It may also be defined simply as versus "free and accepted" which is used as a template in a wing of universal Freemasonry.

The scope of this presentation is to illustrate main features only.

Nonetheless, for better comprehension, it is worthwhile to start with a short historical outline of Freemasonry in this geographical environment.

Historical Summary

Masonic lodges in the territory and vicinity of current Republic of Turkey are known to exist as early as the second quarter of 18th Century. All of these were chartered by various European grand lodges, rarely the British and grand orients in later dates.

The Majority of members were eventually foreigners; local citizens we exceptionally accepted. Still, the number of Turkish Freemasons in these foreign lodges increased over time.

In 1861 a Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite for the Ottoman Empire is said to have been established in Istanbul, however became dormant within a few years.

On the other hand, a body named "Grand Loge de Turquie" was observed to operate in Izmir for a short period during the same era. However, this was not having a national character.

In early 20th Century, consequent to substantially growing number of Turkish brethren, the Supreme Council was reorganized in 1909.

This development was immediately followed by the first national grand lodge, however named as "Ottoman Grand Orient" at the time by considering that existing lodges of other rites than A.A.S.R. may also join the local jurisdiction.

Note that during those days, French was the primary language used both in rituals and masonic communications. This was replaced by Turkish in early 1920's.

Despite having still been styled as a "grand orient", probably by continuing expectation that some foreign lodges working in another discipline may be converting themselves as regards jurisdiction, however keeping their status in rite. Nevertheless, it was actually operating just similar to a grand lodge because all affiliated lodges were observing the symbolic three premier degrees of the A.A.S.R. only.

This establishment was apparently having a liberal character regarding nature, in contradiction with the Freemasonry stating to be “regular” according to the principles set forth by the United Grand Lodge of England. Today, although the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons in Turkey asserts its original date of foundation as 1909 as well, it is much more appropriate to be impartial, and refer to that initial date as the “Foundation of Turkish National Freemasonry”. Furthermore, in this context, it should be taken into account that the status of the country at that time was Ottoman Empire.

In any case, the obvious indication of being liberal in character can be observed in 1921. Before the declaration of the republic, the Ottoman Grand Orient participated in the establishment of the first international masonic association A.M.I. (Association Maçonnique Internationale), which in turn was the primary cause for the United Grand Lodge of England to issue the famous announcement in 1929 named as “Conditions of Recognition”.

After the descent of the Ottoman Empire by the declaration of the “Republic of Turkey” in 1923, the name of the national masonic body was eventually altered to “Grand Orient of Turkey”. However, it may still be regarded as incorrect with respect to actual practice concerning rite, operating only in A.A.S.R.

There's a small but important difference in this emblem that may be recognized by the careful eye in comparison with the previous in which the location was inscribed as “Constantinople”, though that name was never used throughout the history of the Ottoman Empire, whereas in this change it was correctly quoted as “Istanbul”.

It may be worth mentioning that the eighth convention of A.M.I. on 1932 was held in this city. The photograph below shows the attendees.

Unfortunately, Freemasonry in Turkey became dormant in 1935 subsequent to an opposition that occurred within the government as an outcome of antimasonic activities. This was not a legal prohibition that was observed in some European countries at the time, but by self-decision of Turkish Freemasons in order to avoid a problematical situation that was anticipated to occur.

This "period of dormancy" was in effect for 13 years.

When resumed in 1948, even the newly formed blue lodges commenced working under the rule of the Supreme Council, which according to its own constitution, theoretically survived during the period of inactivity.

This state persisted being so until 1957, when a new grand lodge for the symbolic degrees was established. At that time, the title of "Free and Accepted Masons" was proclaimed even though the previous perception of being liberal seemed to have been maintained. Upon the foundation of an independent grand lodge, the covenant with the Supreme Council was revived.

The reason for adopting this title hasn't been explained, but can be assumed by considering the events that followed: Consequent to global changes after the Second World War, an attraction towards Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry emerged among some outstanding brethren. This tendency was somewhat verified through a consecration ceremony organized all of a sudden by certain brethren during the general assembly of the grand lodge in 1965.

Simultaneously a schism, even a chaotic situation arose including the influence of an event in domestic politics. These caused a disagreement both among some brethren as well as between the Grand Lodge and the Supreme Council.

Consequently, Supreme Council cancelled the agreement. Subsequently a number of brethren resigned from the Grand Lodge in 1966, and by the unity of 7 newly founded particular lodges in Istanbul and Izmir, formed another grand lodge under a completely different name.

In a sense, this was a reformation of the original Liberal Freemasonry under identical principles. The Supreme Council immediately agreed to conclude a covenant with the young grand lodge.

The name seen in this emblem was not indicating its masonic approach, thus this was converted later in 1992 immediately after celebrating the 25th year of establishment. Yet this change may be referred to as nothing else than a different version in Turkish language.

We will now concentrate on this Grand Lodge partly in conjunction with the Supreme Council, leaving the "free and accepted" aside.

Women Freemasonry will also be mentioned in due course.

Nevertheless, before carrying on, let's also give a short glance at the other wing.

In 1968, by the impact of the above mentioned schism, some brethren holding the 33rd degree departed from the original supreme council and formed one of their own. The Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons got prepared to virtually joining Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry as regards both regulations and rituals. After some attempts in this regard, The UGLE finally transmitted a letter of recognition in 1970. Hence this was the date of actual separation in Turkish Freemasonry into two somewhat differing wings in masonic approach and philosophy.

We can now put a full stop to the brief historical issues up to 1970's and concentrate specifically on the improvements and continue with the Liberal Freemasonry in Turkey.

Progress of the Liberal Grand Lodge

As soon as starting its activities in 1966, The Liberal Grand Lodge received two charters confirming its order, one from Grande Loge de France and the other from Grand Orient de France, both dimensionally huge, 50x70 cm large in size.

Then the grand lodge was on its way to develop, however slowly and tentatively due to two main reasons:

1- Despite its constitution as an independent and laic republic, it is not so easy to acquire new members in this country; and
2- The principal approach of the grand lodge, subsequently the particular lodges regarding new membership was primarily determined as "observing quality against quantity".

Consequent to number increasing number of brethren, lodges in Istanbul and Izmir also increased. Further, despite difficulties new lodges were established in other cities of the country. Temples belonging to the Grand Lodge were built in Ankara, Adana, Mersin, Bursa, Antalya, Bodrum, and Eskişehir. (Others are rented.)

Today, having celebrated its 55th anniversary in 2021, the numerical size of the grand lodge is about 3500 brethren in 65 particular lodges.

Although not written so in the regulations, membership in the lodges is restricted to males only; however, female freemasons are also admitted to meetings as guests as well as those from any jurisdiction whatsoever.

The lodges of the Liberal Grand Lodge of Turkey are currently distributed in the country as indicated in the following simplified map.

For ease in administration, district organizations with specified authority have been devised.

Marmara District (Istanbul)

Mid-Anatolian District (Ankara, Eskişehir)

Aegean District (Izmir, Bodrum)

Mediterranean District (Antalya)

Çukurova District (Adana, Mersin, Antakya, Gaziantep, Girne)

Bursa Province

The Lodge Rooms

The dimensions and decoration of lodge rooms have been designed and decorated according to local conditions; however, all are alike in appearance. The photograph below is an example of lodge rooms in Istanbul.

We're aware that this appearance may be regarded as somewhat strange from the viewpoint of some brethren due to certain differences regarding most common and customary practices, regarding stations of wardens in particular. However, our preference in this matter is based on a logical reasoning.

In the entrance that remains behind in this photograph, we have the two standard columns of B and J with a set of chains wound under the capital and some symbolic pomegranates on top.

At the left (i.e. near to northwest) upon entrance, the triangular desk of the senior warden is placed. The similar desk of the junior warden is symmetrically on the right. The expert and the master of ceremonies sit in front of the senior and junior wardens respectively.

In the middle is a symbolic mosaic pavement or chequered floor having dimensions of 5x7 (blacks being one more than whites) with the standard three pillars (Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian) located on the southeast, northwest and southwest corners respectively.

Then after some space towards the East, the Altar which requires special attention is situated.

Over the Altar during business is a symbolic "White Book" which is accomplished by the Square and Compasses placed in accordance with the degree concerned, and accompanied by a Sword. (Eventually, the Altar is concealed unless there's a meeting in progress, uncovered while opening the session and covered again after closing.)

At this point, we need to give an explanation: In mid 1970's considerable revisions were made both in the regulations and the rituals. One very important aspect in this regard was the properties of the Altar.

Previously usual standard books of outstanding religious faith, which some masonic bodies refer to as the "V.S.L." were housed and opened up during business. This was replaced by a single "White Book" having bare pages, which may be considered as signifying the constitutions of Freemasonry or whatever those that attend believe, as well as for non-believers if any.

Desks of the Almoner and the Treasurer are positioned adjacent to the East, in front of the seats along the north and the south respectively.

The throne at the back of the relatively larger triangular desk of the Worshipful Master is in the middle of the East. Above on the wall behind is the usual luminous equilateral triangle having an eye inscribed in it.

Chairs are placed for dignitaries at both sides of the Worshipful Master.

Despite somewhat reverse of most practices, figures designating the Sun and the Moon are on the southern and northern walls of the East respectively.

Similarly, triangular desks of the Secretary and the Orator are also in the East, at the northern and southern extremes respectively.

Single candelabrums are present over the desks of first seven officers to be lit according to the ritual of relevant degree.

Sky-blue walls at the north and south are furnished with semi-columns hiding black curtains that are to be drawn when required according to ritual.

A Tasselled Cord surrounds the lodge room near the ceiling ending at both sides in the West.

A design of stars is made on the sky-blue ceiling indicating Ursa Major Constellation and Polaris in particular.

Regalia

Aprons of brethren while attending a lodge meeting are figuratively as below for the entered apprentice, fellow-craft and master mason degrees, from left to right respectively.

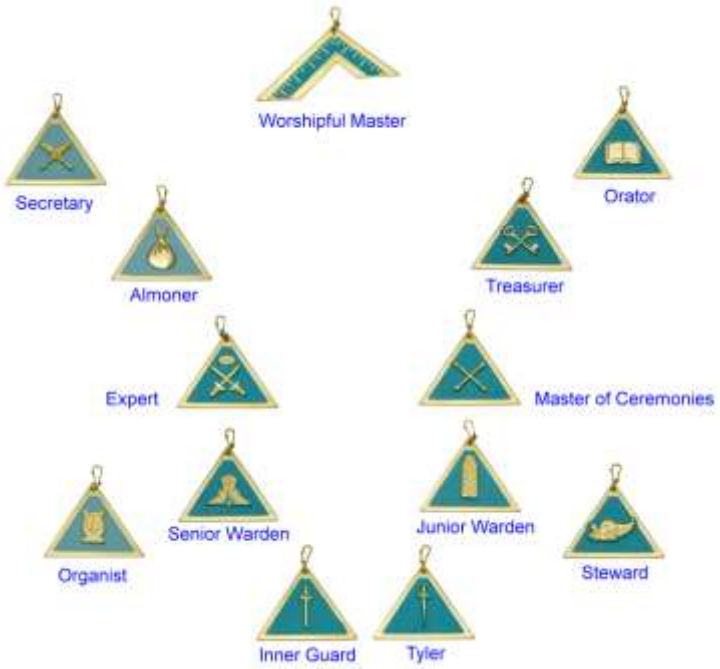
Carrying a jewel hanged on a chain or a ribbon, alternatively over the jacket pocket is optional. Essential are the white gloves.

Aprons and collars of private lodge officers are all alike except the jewel or symbolic figure of the station. Only that of the worshipful master differs.

Worsipful Master

Lodge Officer

The officers are distinguished by specific jewels attached to the bottom of collars.



The district president ("Most Worthy Master") and the district officers regalia are as below:

Most Worthy Master

District Officer

Most Worshipful Grand Master, the Deputy Grand Master, and a grand officer are as shown:

Most Worshipful Grand Master and Deputy

Grand Officer

Apron and cordon of a Past Grand Master is fully white, trimmed with shimmer.

Past Grand Master

Universal Declaration

One of the most outstanding aspects of the Liberal Grand Lodge of Turkey may be regarded as its Universal Declaration.

This testimony consists of the main principles being observed as of the date of foundation but internationally issued in 1991. That was the year of the 25th anniversary, in conjunction with some other significant activities.

Now, due to its importance, let us read this record attentively:

As the Liberal Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Turkey, we favour a masonic understanding that is contemporary, humanitarian, supporting freedom, peaceful, evolutionary and universal.

We don't deem any distinction or special privilege among masonic bodies, institutions, rites and systems, as long as they strive for achieving the universal aims of Freemasonry.

We adhere to the ideal of humanity that will be a means of peace and happiness for all humans and for all communities.

This goal unites all masonic bodies throughout the world such as obediences, jurisdictions, federations, councils, chapters, ateliers, lodges or any others that are named differently.

In this context, we disregard their preferred method of installation, their current mode of organisation and administration, and the rite or system that they choose.

As far as we're concerned, our mutual universal objective requires all masonic bodies to strive for achieving this ideal. Their members should consolidate individual efforts in this respect as well.

Masonic bodies that contemplate likewise, perform endeavours conforming to this universal aim, and observe the prominent rules from time immemorial in getting constituted and organised are genuine and regular institutions of Universal Freemasonry.

We keep our doors and hearts open to all of them and to their members.

As the Liberal Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Turkey, we work in the three symbolic degrees of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite by the guidance of our fundamental principles as

LIBERTY, EQUALITY and FRATERNITY.

We acknowledge that masonic societies may have principles and working methods of their own.

We believe that variety of these add affluence to Freemasonry in the universal extent.

However we detest any behaviour presuming self-principles and working methods as being unique and unchangeable, thus alleging these on others.

We consider every masonic lodge working in the symbolic degrees of Freemasonry as equal to one another.

Similarly, we consider obediences consisting of lodges also as being equal.

We believe that the political, economical, cultural and historical differences between countries will not abolish this equality.

In order for a person to become a freemason, we find it a prerequisite as well as being sufficient to be

- of mature age, having free-thought, earnest, sincere, and holding good moral conduct,

- possessing adequate basic education in order to comprehend the tenets and teachings of Freemasonry, and having a personality revealed to self-improvement.

We allow necessitating any further requirements in persons who may become a freemason to the self-perception of each institution that is concerned.

As the Liberal Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Turkey, we adjudge the attitude of considering discrimination among people due to their nation, race, language, religion, denomination, belief, sex, economical status, cultural characteristics and similar factors as being against the universal principles of Freemasonry.

We believe that, the way leading towards the universal ideal of humanity that purposes peace, happiness and fraternity of all human beings and all communities is the one that is apart from every sort of discrimination.

We think that this route passes through embracing each other with love and respect, and through perfection attained by uniting with tolerance. We look forward to seeing the reflections of such perfection in every activity that provides benefits to humanity.

As the Liberal Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Turkey, we regard it as one of the natural and inevitable requisites of human rights and obligations that everyone, whether man or woman, are equal with respect to the right of becoming a freemason. On behalf of the honour of humanity, we wish that contrary approaches in this respect change.

We consider it as imperative not to intervene in one’s religion, faith, belief peculiar to oneself or disbelief.

We assert that intolerant approaches in this matter will cause quarrel, combat and hostility among persons and communities.

Therefore, during the meetings of our lodges, we place on the altar an open white book having empty sheets throughout.

We perceive that religions, beliefs, ethics, political and economical regimes or doctrines can be deliberated in lodges by an unprejudiced scientific and rational approach. We consider this as useful to us all in expanding our horizons of culture, as well as improving our knowledge, notions, and capabilities.

However, in our lodges, we oppose assertion of biased opinions that are illogical, that deny scientific approach, and that hinder the evolutionary development of humanity.

Whatever the subject matter is, we look upon the action of alleging certain definite opinions or tendencies to individuals and communities as being against Freemasonry.

We regard free transmission of freely generated thoughts to all people as an inevitable principle to be followed for the individual improvement of our brethren and sisters, as well as the institutional improvement of Freemasonry.

Whatever is the subject matter, we disagree any concept or judgment as being definite, final or the absolute truth.

As the Liberal Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Turkey, we are aware of the fact that Freemasonry survived by protecting its genuine procedures and traditions perpetuated for centuries. Yet, we conceive its versatility in adopting itself to the present era that provided it to be always up-to-date.

Therefore, the most basic tradition of Freemasonry is its ability to be in compliance with the current circumstances in the future as it was in the past and it is today. We believe that, all other traditions should be interpreted with respect to this basic one.

Instead of preserving those methods and traditions that had erosion in their meanings and validity, we are in favour of creative and progressive outlooks that don't conflict with our universal aims and principles.

We regard the approach of trying these, putting those found as convenient into practice, giving chance to transform themselves into traditions as a necessity of the characteristics of Freemasonry for being up-to-date.

We think that, partial or full resolution of any past method or tradition into a historical reminiscence depends on time as well as on the laws of evolution.

As the Liberal Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Turkey, we interpret "a freemason" as synonymous to "an exemplar human being who cross-examines oneself, improves continuously, tries to advance towards perfection, is useful to the entire humanity in addition to one's own family and nation, acts considerately for and protects the natural environment as much as the social milieu".

We wish to share this understanding with all masonic institutions throughout the world.

International Relations

The Liberal Grand Lodge of Turkey participated in all available European international masonic unions and societies.

Most important among these is probably CLIPSAS, "Centre de Liaison et d'Information des Puissances Maçonnique Signataires de l'Appel de Strasbourg" which was established in 1961 being almost as the rebirth of A.M.I.

Currently, the number of registered members as grand lodges and grand orients is about 100.

The Liberal Grand Lodge of Turkey joined CLIPSAS in 1989; however, official registration was postponed until 1991 due to a need for national legal permit.

A convention is held annually in a different country. The one in 2001 has been hosted by the Liberal Grand Lodge of Turkey in Istanbul.

Three of our past grand masters acted as vice-president in this international organization.

The next convention of 2023 is also anticipated to be held in Istanbul.

The Liberal Grand Lodge of Turkey currently participates in three other international unions:

1 – Mediterranean Masonic Union

This was founded in 2000. The meetings in 2007 and 2014 were held in Turkey, in Antalya and Istanbul respectively.

2- Masonic Union of the Balkan Peninsula

This was established in 2014, and the second convention was held in Istanbul.

3 – European Masonic Alliance

Consequent to attempts for establishing a union for liberal or adogmatic masonic bodies that operate in Europe only, this society was finally established in 2012 but actually started working in 2016 as a legitimately registered society acknowledged by the European Parliament, its headquarters being located in Brussels. The Liberal Grand Lodge of Turkey has been admitted as a member in this organization as well.

Relations with Supreme Council

The covenant of 1966 between the Grand Lodge and the Supreme Council was revised from time to time and finally re-written consequent to quite long discussions. It was mutually signed by the first five officers of both organizations in a ceremony in 2003 led by the Most Worshipful Grand Master and the Most Potent Grand Commander, and continues to be in effect. (2022)

Grand Master and Grand Commander in the ceremony

Women Freemasonry

This presentation will be concluded by briefly describing Women Freemasonry in Turkey.

During the second half of 1980's, wives, sisters and some other relatives as well as certain colleagues of them were getting prepared to study Freemasonry and related subjects through lectures and concentrated training. This occupation continued for a few years just in the state of theory as far as Freemasonry is concerned until 1991, when a private temporary lodge was formed under control of the Grand Officers of the Grand Lodge on duty and certain supporting brethren to start a serial set of initiations for women candidates only.

The first set was initiation into the entered apprentice degree, rapidly followed by passing to the second and then raising to the third. Those women having attained the Master Mason degree grouped among themselves, and as a start, established four separate private lodges. Through the initiation of further candidates, they reached a total number of 247 members. The lodges united among themselves into an independent grand lodge of feminine freemasons.

The Liberal Grand Lodge issued a warrant confirming the order of this new masonic society.

By time, the Feminine Grand Lodge increased the number its particular lodges up to 22, some of them working in other valleys where lodge rooms belonging to the Liberal Grand Lodge are available. Nevertheless, they bought a building in Istanbul which was previously in use for masonic activities and constructed one purely for themselves in Ankara.

The Grand Lodge of Feminine Freemasons was admitted to CLIPSAS in 1997, then became a member of CLIMAF as well (i.e. Centre de Liaison International de la Maçonnerie Féminine)

Here's a photograph of one of the lodge rooms in their building in Istanbul.

Continuous improvement of women freemasons inevitably made their way to receive higher degrees as well. Degrees in special chapters have been devised under the patronage of the Supreme Council. After quite a number of years that elapsed by this means, and upon having raised some to the 33rd degree of A.A.S.R., the Women Supreme Council for Turkey was established in 2016.

This is all to be said in this brief presentation.

Thank you for reading.